

Portland performers put on true reality show

by Seth Harkness

A dramatic production in which a cast of local officials and residents all play themselves might seem to have all the artistic potential of a city council meeting. In fact, many of the people who performed Friday at the Center for Cultural Exchange may have met before at City Hall - including Portland's mayor and fire chief, and leaders of several minority groups. But several cast members said playing themselves in a theatrical production dealing with issues of security and civil rights allowed them to speak and be heard in a way that would never happen offstage.

"It creates a safe place for conversation," said Mayor Jill Duson, who plays one of the 10 speaking roles in "home land security."

"I think people take away a lot of learning about each other in a way that would take us years in any other context," Duson said.

The performance was a response to an incident in Portland in January 2004, when federal agents raided ethnic restaurants and other gathering spots in search of illegal aliens. The action created anger and distrust among the city's minority populations, with some people skipping work and refusing to send their children to school for fear of being arrested.

At the invitation of the artistic director of the Center for Cultural Exchange, New York theater artist Marty Pottenger visited Portland over the course of a year to create a play based on the incident.

Pottenger interviewed 80 people and selected 10 for parts in the performance. The characters, including a homeless man who writes poetry, a Mexican-American minister and a French-Canadian fiddler, speak their own words, which Pottenger edited from interviews.

Several performers said they felt the play helped create an honest dialogue on issues of race, immigration and national security that probably would not have occurred in any other setting. "It's a real conversation about things that people find hard to talk about," Duson said.

The performers came from different and sometimes clashing perspectives. Portland Fire Chief Fred LaMontagne, for instance, said his part involves explaining how he thinks about security threats in terms of "protecting the many, not the few."

LaMontagne said his views might put him at odds with people who take an individualistic view,

but he said he felt the play helped everyone understand each other's motivations and concerns.

"It brings a heightened level of awareness on both sides," he said. "Those that are being scrutinized and also perhaps the reasons the scrutiny is occurring."

Such a frank discussion was exactly what some in the audience came to hear. Duncan Wright of Portland said one of the most troubling things, for him, about the immigration raid in 2004 was a lack of dialogue on the issues it raised.

"It's refreshing to have somebody say, through art, 'Yes, this should be out in the open,' " he said. "This is talking about the elephant in the room."